

Genetic catastrophe: learn, then lay them to rest

To the editor,

To a certain extent, I agree with all of the points of view accompanying Camille Solyagua's photographs in the September 2001 issue of *wjm*, but I find the most resonant viewpoint is that of Kathleen Cranley Glass.¹ In our culture, the bodies of the dead are laid to rest as a sign of respect and as a vehicle for closure. We even honor the family dog or cat in this way when they have been loved pets of children and ourselves.

As Glass pointed out, these infants were born to mothers and fathers—parents who felt pain and grief only barely imaginable by others, pain and grief that we are deliberately trained to suppress to maintain our clinical detachment.

As a physician, the exposure to these images is part of my education—in the event that I should deliver an infant with deformities of this nature, I need to remain calmly clinical as I deal with the situation and tend, not just to the infant (if viable), but also to the mother, who will be devastated. I hope I will be effective in helping to heal the emotional trauma she will face.

Let us learn from these unfortunates. We can photograph and scan and even autopsy them, but we must do so with care and reverence. And when we are done learning, I agree we should lay them to rest with all of the honor and sadness we would show for a “normal” stillborn infant.

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Reference

- 1 Glass KC. Please lay them to rest. *West J Med* 2001;175:180.